Maharlika

PINOY LIFE IN THE MARIANAS

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Forgotten Vets

Today, thousands of elderly Filipino veterans are being forced to live their last years far from their children and grandchildren due to an American policy that reflects decades of neglect.

Page 3

Ai-Ai Comeback

Comedienne Ai-Ai De las Alas is out to break box-office records again via Star Cinema's "Cute ng Ina Mo," which opens April 7. No doubt she will outdo herself in her role as an absentee mother.

Page 5

All set for Cohen dialogue

Discussion panel formed for talks

By LIBERTY DONES
REPORTER

The Filipino community is all set for tomorrow's much anticipated dialogue with visiting Office of Insular Affairs deputy assistant secretary David B. Cohen at the Multi-Purpose Hall in Susupe.

The meeting, which will take place from 2pm to 5pm and is organized by the Philippine Consulate General and Filipino groups led by the United Filipino Organization, is expected to focus on the impact of federalization on overseas Filipino workers.

This came following a request from the OIA amid talks of federalization in the CNMI.

UFO co-chair Ed Reyes said

ALL SET Page 2

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Insular Affairs David Cohen, center, talks with Attorney General Matthew Gregory, CNMI's Washington Rep. Pete A. Tenorio and Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Villagomez during the 7th Western Micronesian Chief Executive Summit at the Fiesta Resort and Spa this week.

Cohen: I'll be mostly listening

By MARCONI CALINDAS
REPORTER

David Cohen, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary for insular affairs, is ready to meet with the Filipino community on Sunday to hear their input relating to the proposed federalization of labor and immigration in the Commonwealth.

In an interview with Cohen during the recently concluded 7th Western Micronesian Chief Executives Summit, he said he is looking forward to the event this weekend.

"I thought since I'm coming out here for the 902 conversations and also for the summit, it will be a good opportunity to collect information from various constituencies like the Filipino community," he said.

Cohen said his office is also organizing similar meetings with other groups—anyone that wants to present their views.

"I'll be mostly listening. If people have questions about what's going on, I'll be happy to do my best to explain all the different things. I mean, nothing is certain now. The timing of any legislation is uncertain

COHEN Page 2

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Fong plans medical and pharmacy school in NMI

By AGNES E. DONATO
REPORTER

A Filipino doctor based in California is looking to establish a medical and pharmacy school on Saipan.

Dr. Johnny Y. Fong, who practices pediatrics in Fresno, was one of the private sector presenters at the 7th Western Micronesian Chief Executives Summit, held at the Fiesta Resort and Spa on March 20-22, 2007.

He is the chairman of the board of the Loyola Medical College Foundation Inc., a non-profit organization that has donated millions of pesos in charitable contributions to educational institutions in the Phil-

FONG Page 2

Loyola Medical College Foundation, Inc. board chair Johnny Y. Fong gestures as he talk during his presentation at the 7th Western Micronesian Chief Executive Summit at the Fiesta Resort and Spa.

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PINOYNEWS

Film stars, family feuds, intrigue add color to RP election

MANILA—Movie stars, divided families, failed coup plotters and friends turning against each other make the May midterm elections in the Philippines seem more like a gaudy soap opera than an exercise in democracy.

The main focus of the campaign is on the race for 12 seats in the 24-seat Senate where President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's "Team Unity" is going up against the so-called Genuine Opposition (GO).

But it is hard to tell what side anyone is on when Arroyo's team includes former senators Vicente Sotto and Teresa Oreta who once called for her to quit.

On the GO slate former Arroyo allies like Manuel Villar, who Arroyo herself groomed for the Senate presidency, figure prominently. Villar, who is running as an independent, was adopted as a guest candidate by GO.

Sotto admitted that he joined the Arroyo ticket not on principle but only after he and Oreta were dropped from the opposition slate.

"There was a new list [of opposition candidates] and my friends were left out," he said recently.

"You can't blame us for feeling bad. We are the political elders and we were left out in favor of the prodigal sons," Sotto had said.

For Philippine senators, who are elected by the nation rather than by province like their US counterparts who represent states, name-recognition is crucial—and gives an edge to celebrities such as film and sports stars.

TEAM Unity campaign manager Reli German says they are running on the issue of economic growth but admits that "people vote on the basis of awareness and popularity. This is a fact of Philippine political life."

It is the reason why movie star Cesar Montano is on TEAM Unity's senatorial slate even though he has no experience in government. But he is not the first and will not be the last celebrity to be elected to high office in the Philippines.

The best example is movie star Joseph Estrada who was elected president in 1998 despite a reputation for gambling, drinking, sexual promiscuity, and his lack of education.

Estrada's short presidency was noted for mismanagement and corruption.

Just 30 months after being elected by the biggest majority ever in Philippine politics, with just under 40 percent of the popular vote, he was ousted in a popular uprising in 2001 following a massive corruption scandal. He is now detained and on trial for graft.

In trying to justify his run for the Senate, Montano acknowledged his shortcomings, but also questioned whether brains were really that important in politics.

"We have had so many people who went into politics who were smart and eloquent but let us ask, 'what have they done for us?' Our [Asian] neighbors have moved one foot [economically]. We have moved one inch," he said in a recent television interview.

One of the most colorful senatorial candidates is veteran coup-plotter and ex-army colonel Gregorio Honasan who led several bloody coup attempts in the 1980s and is on trial for involvement in a coup attempt against Arroyo in 2003.

Honasan is running as an independent while in detention and says he is willing to be adopted by any party—including Arroyo's TEAM Unity. Not surprisingly, Arroyo turned him down.

Boxing champion Manny Pacquiao, arguably the most popular person in the country, abandoned plans to run for Congress after polls showed the vast majority of his fans thought it would be a bad move.

The GO slate has a "star" of sorts among its candidate line-up: a once-obscure navy lieutenant named Antonio Trillanes who skyrocketed to fame when he led a one-day mutiny on July 2003 aimed at bringing down Arroyo and installing a military junta.

Like Honasan, Trillanes campaigns from his prison cell while being court-martialed for mutiny, using his network of supporters and the Internet.

Although Trillanes is barred from granting interviews and his cell has no Internet access, the military suspects sympathizers in the armed forces are putting postings on his website for him.

Under the law any literate Filipino without a criminal record can run for office. Trillanes' trial has begun but no one knows how long it will take.

One race that has grabbed a lot of local media attention is the gubernatorial contest in the wealthy province of Batangas, south of Manila, with sibling rivalry and showbiz in the mix.

Vilma Santos, one of the biggest movie stars in the Philippines, is up against Vice-Governor Ricky Recto who is eyeing the same seat.

ALL SET

FROM PAGE 1

a panel was formed to facilitate tomorrow's discussion.

It comprises Fe Calixterio, a former college education program director; Jaime Vergara and Pastor Gagarin from the Public School System; Fr. Nonoy Recaido of San Roque Catholic Church; Ramiro Trinidad, a church pastor; and three newspaper editors: Jayvee Vallejera of Saipan Tribune and Zaldy Dandan and Haidee Eugenio from Marianas Variety.

Yet to confirm attendance is PSS elementary school counselor Rebecca Flores.

The panelists were chosen by Consul General Wilfrido Maximo.

Philippine Labor Office representative Lourdes Lavilla will serve as moderator.

To be seated with Cohen will be OIA field representative Jeff Schorr, Federal Ombudsman Jim Benedetto, Maximo, and UFO president Ramon Awit.

Reyes called on the Filipino organization leaders and representatives to come early for the meeting.

"We'd like to start and finish promptly. We want our fellow Filipinos to come before 2pm, especially the leaders and representatives," he said.

Due to the expected large turnout, seating inside the multi-purpose will be limited to a few individuals, about 50, said UFO.

To ensure that everyone gets a chance to monitor the proceedings, the organization will set up an audio-visual system outside the building.

Reyes said the group originally planned to put up a multimedia projector and a big screen outside but the group opted for TV sets rather than projectors to ensure a clearer reception.

"I hope our fellow Filipinos would understand why only a limited number of people could go inside the venue. What's important is that we will have the chance to hear what the U.S. government has to say about our status in the CNMI," Awit had said.

Attendees are free to ask questions by writing them down and passing them to the designated panelists.

"There are people who will be collecting the questions from the audience," said Reyes.

MDX Radio Saipan will help marshal the event.

The Department of Public Safety would help secure the area.

COHEN

FROM PAGE 1

at this point," he said.

He added that, as part of the administration, he would work with Congress to explore its options. "They [U.S. Congress lawmakers] have taken us up on that, and asked for our assistance in drafting the bill."

The U.S. Department of the Interior has been asked to draft the CNMI immigration legislation, based on the 2001 Murkowski bill.

OIA field representative Jeff Schorr told Saipan Tribune in a separate interview that the scheduled meeting with the Filipino community is all set.

He said the Office of the Federal Ombudsman is also setting up similar meetings with the Chinese and Korean groups. However, Schorr said that OIA has identified some issues that should be dealt with in meeting with them such as the language barrier.

He said OIA is starting with the Filipino community as it is easier to organize due to the presence of the Philippine Consulate, which could mobilize the community.

"Unlike China and Korea, they don't have that centralized office [here] to organize their community," he added.

The Filipino community is considered the largest ethnic group in the Commonwealth.

The meeting with Cohen is schedule Sunday, March 25, 2pm at the Pedro P. Tenorio Multi-Purpose Center in Susupe. Cohen will be joined by OIA staff members to answer questions from the group.

Philippine Consul General Wilfredo DL Maximo earlier said the meeting with Cohen will inform Filipinos of what "may or may not happen" in the CNMI. Maximo said the discussion with Cohen would also clarify the various rumors relating to federalization.

FONG

FROM PAGE 1

ippines. The foundation has donated a total of P5 million pesos in scholarship grants and P30 million to San Beda College for the construction of school buildings. Negotiations are ongoing regarding professorial chairs at the University of the Philippines in Manila, where Fong completed his medical degree in 1971.

During the recently concluded conference, Fong presented a five-year plan that integrates health care needs with education opportunities in the Commonwealth and the rest of the Micronesian region.

His plan includes setting up a medical and pharmacy school that will cater to students from the U.S. mainland, Asia and the Pacific. According to Fong, some 6,000 Americans who fail to pass U.S. medical school requirements go to the Caribbean, Russia, the Philippines and other countries every year to study medicine. He said the CNMI, with its political relationship with the United States and its scenic natural environment, could attract some of these students.

In line with the foundation's mission, the school will be operated as a not-for-profit corporation. The school must be able to generate enough income to support itself. Any profits will go to charity.

"We're not putting it up to lose money. The school has to be able to stand on its own feet, so we can propagate it for many years," Fong said.

Fong, who leaves today, expects to be back in two to three weeks with the application to establish the school. If the government approves his plan by May 2007, the school can begin operations by September, he said.

He hopes to start the program with some 200 students for each class (medicine and pharmacy).

"The objective of the plan is to help the CNMI become self-sufficient in health delivery services and help cut the cost of medical referrals," he said.

China's second-richest man to invest $2 billion in RP tourism

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—China's second-richest man plans to invest at least US$2 billion (€1.5 billion) to develop high-end hotels and other tourism projects in the Philippines, officials said.

The chairman of the Shanghai-based real estate and furniture empire Shimao Group met with Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo this week and expressed interest in tourism investments, Trade Secretary Peter Favila said Wednesday.

Shimao was founded by Xu Rongmao, who ranked second on the Forbes' list of 400 richest people in China last year.

Favila said Shimao chairman Hui Wing Mau "told me he has made his decision, he will invest here, in the Philippines."

A Shimao Group spokeswoman based in Hong Kong, Chow Yiu Hon, said she was unable to provide any information at present because the company had yet to announce its plans to shareholders.

A Shimao public relations manager in Shanghai said the company did have the interest and intent to invest in Philippine tourism projects. The manager, who gave only his surname, Qian, said the plan was in the initial stages and no specific investment figures or other detailed information was available.

Arroyo was quoted as saying that the Chinese ambassador in Manila confirmed the plan.

Favila said the Shimao Group was apparently convinced to undertake projects because of an increasing influx of Chinese tourists in the country and the limited hotel capacity. About 300,000 mainland Chinese visited last year.

Favila said the hotels would be built inside former military camps in Manila.

LABOR FRONT

Filing discrimination complaint with EEOC

By FERDIE P. DE L ATORRE
REPORTER

Q: How can an alien worker file a discrimination complaint before the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission?

A: EEOC is a federal agency that handles complaints of workplace discrimination. A nonresident worker may file a discrimination lawsuit at the nearest EEOC office by mail or in person. According to EEOC, individuals who need help such as sign language interpreter and print materials in an accessible format in order to file a complaint should inform the EEOC field office so appropriate arrangements can be made.

■ ■ ■

Q: Can an organization file a complaint with the EEOC on behalf of an alien worker?

A: Yes. An organization or agency and an individual may file a complaint on behalf of another person in order to protect the aggrieved person's identity. EEOC said that any individual who believes that his or her employment rights have been violated may file a discrimination complaint.

■ ■ ■

Q: Are there time limits in filing a discrimination complaint before EEOC?

A: Yes. A complaint must be filed with EEOC within 180 days from the date of the alleged violation, in order to protect the charging party's rights.

This 180-day filing deadline is extended to 300 days if the complaint is covered by a state or local anti-discrimination law.

The time limits, however, do not apply to claims under the Equal Pay Act, because under that Act persons do not have to first file a charge with EEOC in order to have the right to go to court. EEOC, however, advises that since many EPA claims also raise sex discrimination issues, a complainant may file charges under both laws within the time limits indicated. EEOC also underscored the importance of contacting its office promptly when discrimination is suspected to protect legal rights.

Submit questions on labor issues to *Saipan Tribune* via e-mail at editor@saipantribune.com, or by calling 235-6397, 235-2440, or 235-8747 and leaving a message at Ext. 133 or 135. You may also submit questions in person by writing it down and dropping it off at the *Saipan Tribune*'s office on the second floor of the CIC Centre on Beach Road, Garapan.

'RP's worker deployment system is world's standard'

By VERONICA UY
INQUIRER.NET

Despite problems with illegal recruitment, irregular and distressed workers, and the so-called brain drain, the Philippines' labor deployment system is the world's standard, said Brunson McKinley, director general of the International Organization for Migration.

McKinley, who is here for the launching of the National Reintegration Center, among other reasons, said: "The Philippines has [a] clear advantage on labor migration over all countries in the countries."

He said the country's system of recruitment, contracts, training, welfare, insurance, and protection of rights are all in place.

"It is not perfect but it is good," he told reporters after the dinner hosted by the labor department in his honor Monday night.

"The Philippines is doing a very good job. It is not by accident that the Philippines is considered the model in labor migration where systems that work are in place. The whole world can learn from the Philippines as globalization of labor is growing all around the world," he added.

McKinley said that as a pioneer in the field, the Philippines should now move up the overseas workforce ladder. He said that in the beginning, the country was deploying workers to more basic jobs.

"We see that in the seafarers. A generation ago, Filipinos were sailors, now they're officers and captains," he said.

The IOM chief said he foresees a big growth in labor migration especially since working abroad is now easier than it used to be.

"The demographic trends show that there are more spaces for foreign workers to work in," he said. "This is the end result of a freer labor market and general prosperity in the world."

The Philippines has some eight million Filipinos working and living outside the Filipinos. And the number continues to increase as more than 3,000 Filipinos leave the country every day.

The forgotten cause of Filipino WWII veterans

By AUDREY McAVOY
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WAIANAE, Hawaii (AP)—Manuel S. Pablo crouched in foxholes to defend the Philippines against invading Japanese soldiers in World War II. He watched a Japanese guard stab one of his comrades to death with a bayonet during the Bataan Death March when the starving prisoner of war dared to ask for another bowl of rice.

Even though Pablo risked his life for the United States, which controlled the Philippines as a commonwealth at the time, his children cannot win approval to live with him in America during his retirement.

Scholars and veteran advocates say the policy reflects decades of neglect, dating to 1946 when Washington broke wartime promises that the soldiers could become U.S. citizens and enjoy the same pension and medical benefits as American troops.

The federal government has since belatedly fulfilled those commitments, but only in the past two decades and only in fits and starts. Some issues remain unresolved, like resident rights for the children of veterans.

Today, thousands of elderly veterans—including those wounded in battle and awarded the Bronze Star and other medals—are forced to live their last years far from their children and grandchildren.

"I feel lonely whenever I think about them," Pablo, 88, said during an interview on the wooden porch of his home in Waianae. "If only they were here."

Veterans and their backers say the need to reunite divided families only grows more urgent given the advancing age of the veterans.

There are as many as over 50,000 Filipino veterans of World War II alive today. Some 10,000 are said to live in the United States, including 2,000 in Hawaii. Most are in their 70s and 80s.

Pablo enlisted in the Philippine Scouts, a U.S. Army unit, after a recruiting truck drove through his hometown of San Nicolas in Ilocos Norte province.

AP

World War II Filipino veteran Manuel Pablo, 88, holds a Bronze Star and POW medal Tuesday, March 6, 2007, at his home in Waianae, Hawaii. He was awarded the medals while serving the U.S. military in the Philippines during World War II.

When the Imperial Japanese Army invaded on Dec. 8, 1941, he and his fellow soldiers dug foxholes to fight against troops shooting at them from the jungle. He recalls hunkering down between the corpses of fallen comrades, using their bodies to shield himself from bullets.

Other Filipinos formed the resistance against Japanese troops after U.S. forces surrendered at Bataan and Gen. Douglas MacArthur withdrew to Australia, uttering the famous phrase, "I shall return."

Belinda Aquino, a University of Hawaii political science professor, said the U.S. "dumped" Filipino veterans after World War II. Their cause fell out of focus in the postwar years as the U.S. worried about communism.

"The Philippines was just not an important priority for the U.S.," she said.

It took Washington 45 years after the war to offer veterans a proper chance to obtain citizenship. Yet the Immigration Act of 1990 only allowed each veteran to bring one immediate family member to the United States, forcing most to leave their children behind.

The shortcomings of that law have left the sons and daughters of the veterans with no choice but to get in line for immigration visas along with everyone else. On average, they must wait about 20 years because so many Filipinos hope to emigrate and the limits are set by nationality.

Pablo's three sons and four daughters have been on the list since 1994, two years after he immigrated to Hawaii and became a U.S. citizen.

Sen. Daniel K. Akaka, a Democrat from Hawaii, this year reintroduced a bill to remedy the situation. It would allow children of Filipino World War II veterans to sidestep the immigration waiting list.

The measure died last year when it was included in a large omnibus immigration bill that was derailed by disagreements over a border fence and making English the national language.

Akaka is optimistic the Senate will pass the reunification legislation this year, said Jon Yoshimura, an Akaka spokesman. The Veterans Affairs Committee, which Akaka chairs, plans to hold hearings on the issue next month coinciding with the 65th anniversary of the Bataan Death March on April 9.

Sen. Larry Craig, a Republican who is the ranking minority member of the committee, has not taken a position on the bill, his spokesman Jeff Schrade said.

Other lawmakers plan a bill that would give full pension and disability benefits those Filipino veterans who have been denied the same benefits as former American soldiers. Members of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus said Wednesday they would support the measure.

Pablo could live in the Philippines near his children. But he prefers to live in the U.S. where he can access the medical care he needs at veterans' hospitals.

He still takes medicine and receives therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder. The war memories from six decades ago still haunt him today.

"When he gets nightmares, he's shaking. He's saying 'Can you cover my face? They are coming,'" said his wife, Fely Pablo. "He says 'The Japanese are coming!'"

Arroyo orders pay hike for govt workers

Less than two months before the crucial midterm elections, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo Thursday ordered a 10-percent across-the-board increase in the monthly pay of all civilian employees of the government in the national and local levels.

Through Executive Order No. 611, Ms Arroyo also raised the monthly hazard pay and daily subsistence allowance of military and police personnel.

The compensation adjustments mandated by EO 611 will take effect on July 1.

"I have just signed an executive order . . . adding yet another compensation increase for government employees," Ms Arroyo said at the commencement rites of Sansinirangan Class of 2007 of the Philippine National Police Academy.

She said the basic salary of government employees had not been increased since July 2001 despite periodic wage adjustments in the private sector and the steady rise in the prices of basic commodities.

"There is an imperative need to improve the morale of the civil service through a more competitive compensation system that supports the economic well-being of government personnel," Ms Arroyo said in the executive order dated March 14.

EO 611 directs the Department of Budget and Management to implement a 10-percent increase in the basic salaries of civilian government personnel whose positions are covered by the Compensation and Classification System under Republic Act No. 6758.

Entitled to a pay increase are officials and employees of national government agencies, state universities and colleges, government-owned and -controlled corporations (GOCCs), government financial institutions (GFIs) and local government units (LGUs).

The pay raise for officials and employees of GOCCs and GFIs will come from their respective corporate funds.

The executive order directs LGUs to pay for the increase of their officials and employees.

P8.2B set aside

Sen. Ralph Recto, chair of the Senate ways and means committee, said P8.2 billion had been set aside in the 2007 national budget to cover the pay increase of about 840,000 officials and employees of national government agencies for the second half of the year.

Recto said about 440,000 public school teachers would get a pay increase of about P1,000 a month.

A total of P2.1 billion in the current national budget has also been allotted for an increase in the allowance and hazard pay of 282,349 police and military personnel.

Arroyo ordered a P30 increase in the daily subsistence allowance and a P120 increase in the monthly hazard pay of personnel in the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Department of the Interior and Local Government, Philippine Coast Guard and National Mapping and Resource Information Authority.

She said the subsistence allowance was last adjusted in 1998, while the hazard pay has remained at P120 a month since it was first given in 1987.

Justification

Justifying the salary increase, the executive order said "an efficient and effective civil service is crucial to the continuous development of our country."

Arroyo said the pay increase was part of the "social payback" that was made possible due to her administration's "sturdy fiscal house, solid program of good governance and political stability under the rule of law and criminal justice."

In her speech, the President also announced a 50-hectare housing project in Silang, Cavite, for the Philippine National Police as she exhorted the PNPA graduates and all police personnel to protect the integrity of the May 14 congressional and local elections. ***(Inquirer)***

Rescued crew recall ship's last minutes in rough seas

Rescued Chinese crewmen from the MV Unicorn Ace cargo vessel, descend to a waiting Philippine Coast Guard vessel as they bid farewell to their rescuers, the crewmen of the Indian cargo ship MV Prabhu Yuvika, for their journey back home Thursday March 22, 2007, off Manila Bay in Manila, Philippines.

AP

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—The rescued crew of a cargo ship that sank off the northern Philippines on Thursday recalled how their vessel had been battered by huge waves in bad weather before it capsized, leaving them floating for hours in rough seas.

The Panamanian-registered MV Unicorn Ace, which had 19 crew members, sank Wednesday in waters west of Currimao in Ilocos Norte province, about 400 kilometers (250 miles) north of the Philippine capital.

A passing ship, the MV Prabhu Yuvika was able to rescue 11 of the crew—10 Chinese and one Taiwanese—and on Thursday handed them to the Philippine coast guard on Manila Bay.

Two other crew members were rescued by a ship that was headed to China, along with the body of another crewman, coast guard spokesman Lt. Senior Grade Armand Balilo said.

Coast guard and navy vessels and aircraft will continue searching for five others still missing, Balilo said.

Motioning with his hands, Chien Chien Shion, the Taiwanese crew member, told reporters how their ship was battered by rough seas and was rolling in the water before it sank. He said they were in the water for about seven hours before being rescued by the Prabhu Yuvika.

He said his ship was carrying logs from Malaysia and was headed to Taichung, Taiwan. The Prabhu Yuvika was headed to Indonesia to load coal, said the ship's captain Gurvinder Singh.

Some of Unicorn Ace crewmen, several with abrasions on their arms and faces, were teary eyed as they waved goodbye to their rescuers.

The Chinese crew would receive a medical check-up before eventually being sent home, China's Consul General Guo Shaochun said, without saying when they would leave the Philippines.

There was no immediate word on what would happen to the Taiwanese crewman. Taiwan, which has no diplomatic ties with the Philippines, maintains a commercial office in Manila.

Military execs destroy thousands of rebel rifles

By JIM GOMEZ
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—The Philippine military and defense chiefs, armed with metal cutters, led the destruction on Thursday of thousands of assault rifles seized mostly from communist guerrillas—a symbolic act in an effort to halve rebel forces in three years.

Military chief of staff Gen. Hermogenes Esperon said government forces were on track in their campaign to cut the communist New People's Army's 7,000-strong guerrilla force in half by 2010, leaving the insurgents weak enough to be regarded as a police problem.

The 120,000-strong military, traditionally in charge of external defense, has been leading efforts to crush the 38-year-old communist rebellion for years. Mounting rebel attacks prompted police to take on a larger role in the counterinsurgency, including combat assistance, starting last year.

"Some would even criticize us for taking a very ambitious timeline but, we assure you, the way we look at it, we can go for a 2010 deadline," Esperon told The Associated Press in an interview.

"By that time, they would not be able to launch major tactical operations and the police can take care of them," he said.

Wearing black aprons, gloves and protective eyewear, Esperon, Defense Secretary Hermogenes Ebdane and army chief Lt. Gen. Romero Tolentino took assault rifles and grenade launchers from a stack of more than 1,600 weapons and cut them to pieces with electrical saws during an army anniversary celebration.

They were among 53,800 rifles and grenade launchers, many old and rusty, that were seized from communist rebels and al-Qaida-linked militants during clashes and rebel surrenders in recent years. About half were no longer usable and will be destroyed, while the rest could be repaired, Tolentino said.

Group calls on restos to stop serving endangered species

By TERESA CEROJANO
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—Steamed Napoleon wrasse, which appears on the menu of several Manila restaurants, may sound delectable. But savoring it could hasten the extinction of a vanishing species, an international conservation group warned Thursday.

The World Wide Fund for Nature, known as WWF, said it has received reports that several restaurants in the Philippine capital serve the endangered fish, while at least two top Japanese restaurants offer whale meat sushi.

"WWF is appealing to these businesses to stop serving all threatened and endangered animals," the group said in a statement. "The slaughter and sale of these animals is not only unethical—it is downright illegal under a host of local and international laws."

Some 40 million Filipinos rely on the sea for sustenance, and "with restaurants still serving endangered species with impunity, we should not be surprised that barely 1 percent of Philippine reefs remain in pristine condition," WWF said.

Other species that should not be sold include giant groupers, dwarf pygmy gobies, whale sharks, basking and zebra sharks, big-eye and bluefin tuna, giant manta rays, sea turtles and numerous whale and dolphin species, it said.

Ai-Ai appeases Kris by apologizing to James

By DOLLY ANNE CARVAJAL
INQUIRER

Comedienne Ai-Ai De las Alas is out to break box-office records again via Star Cinema's "Cute ng Ina Mo," which opens April 7. No doubt she will outdo herself in her role as an absentee mother.

In real life, Ai is a 24/7 single mom. She's overjoyed that her eldest son Sancho, 16, has graduated from high school.

"Unbelievable na magka-college na anak ko! Naiiyak nga ako nung graduation but Miguel (Vera) kept teasing me kaya biglang umurong ang tears ko!"

The estranged couple is on good terms. Ai enthuses: "Happy ang dalawang anak namin (Shaun, 13 and Sophia, 11) na peace kami. Pati si Sancho na anak ko kay Rey Malte Cruz (a stage actor), si Miguel ang kinikilalang daddy. In fairness, nagattend si Papa Miguel ng graduation ni Sancho. Sperm donor lang 'yung biological dad. Dati gusto akong ihulog ni Miguel sa building nung grabeng away namin, ngayon bibilhan na niya ko ng building (laughter)!"

But Ai suddenly stops laughing when asked about James Yap. She laments: "When I told Kris na isoli muna si James sa nanay niya, I said that in jest. I wanted to cheer up Kris 'cause she was going through a lot. Na-shock talaga ako when James texted me na mad siya. Can't he take a joke? Pati ba naman ako papatulan niya? Naawa ako kay Kris kasi siya ang inaaway so napilitan na ko mag-sorry kay James para matapos na lang."

Ai is too lovable on and off screen not to forgive. Seems like James doesn't have a sense of humor—just as he hardly makes any sense in trying to save face.

New partner?

Could it be true that Rustom Padilla is falling for a good-looking university cager? He had no qualms about coming out on national TV. When the time is right, I'm sure Rustom will proudly announce if he has found a partner.

Reunited

Director non-pareil Maryo J. de los Reyes happily told me that his shooting with Aga Muhlach and Maricel Soriano is going smoothly. It's been 10 years since he last worked with them. The yet untitled movie is the very first Aga-Maricel team-up.

"Nakunan na love scene ni Ags and Mary. Jitters and kulitan at first until naging comfortable na. Maria is no longer stiff in love scenes. Aga has been smitten by her charm," says Direk. "Both are coming back to me as their mentor. They both have more depth and maturity now!"

Angelica Panganiban is also in the cast as a flight attendant. Aga portrays a land developer; Maricel, a gynecologist. Direk says it's a love triangle with a twist. From every angle, the movie is bound to be a masterpiece.

No match

Roxanne Guinoo denies rumors that Mariel Rodriguez and Janelle Jamer are getting insecure about her entry into "Wowowee." She clarifies: "They are supportive. Teamwork kami, walang inggitan. We all just want to make the audience happy."

What if Willie Revillame, a known ladies' man, courts her? She laughs. "Walang ganung factor! I have high respect for Kuya Willie. I know di niya ako tataluhin. Besides, I prefer guys my age. And after Joross, I'm not yet ready to fall again."

At the rate her career is booming, her heart is not about to go boom-tarat-tarat.

Concert artist

Dennis Trillo is ecstatic about his self-titled debut album (Indimusic, Universal Records). It contains 12 tracks, including a duet with Regine Velasquez (album producer along with Ogie Alcasid) "Magtatagpong Muli," Ogie's composition "Para Sa Iyo," the Air Supply hit "All Out of Love" and Eric Carmen's "Love is All that Matters."

After proving his worth as an actor, Dennis is now bent on becoming a concert artist. "It's harder to sing live than to act 'cause walang take two," says Dennis. "But singing is like acting. As an actor I get into character for the role to come to life. When I sing, I have to really feel the lyrics."

Is he out to beat Sam Milby and Piolo Pascual who are also matinee idols-turned-singers? "They have their own style. I have mine. There's room for everybody."

Any special girl he had in mind while recording the album? "To whom it may concern na lang (laughs)!"

Ai-Ai De las Alas

For sure, legions of girls out there would gladly volunteer.

Framed?

My heart goes out to Niño Muhlach, who was arrested for possession of 1.9 grams of shabu in a Libis mall. He has posted bail. I texted him but got no reply.

According to a mutual friend, Onin must have been framed. I don't discount the possibility of a political angle, in light of the election fever. Onin's a staunch FPJ supporter. With his thriving businesses, I see no reason for him to resort to drugs.

The last time we spoke, he was in high spirits, telling me about how he met his love child after 11 long years. I always tease Onin about his womanizing. We all have our vices. Knowing Onin, he would choose the lesser evil.

A fun time as Fantine

By BAYANI SAN DIEGO JR.
INQUIRER

Writing from New York, singer-actress Lea Salonga told Inquirer Entertainment via e-mail that her big Broadway homecoming last Feb. 22 was "quite uneventful."

"We were greeted by rain and cold weather," she recalled. "If only there was more to it than that, but no."

But since her arrival coincided with her 36th birthday, she had the perfect excuse to party … somewhat.

"We had dinner out with friends and family and it was nice," she recounted.

Apart from taking over the role of Fantine in "Les Misérables" (the first Asian to do so on Broadway), Lea's Big Apple trip this time around is made extra memorable because she's with baby Nicole Beverly who's turning one on May 16.

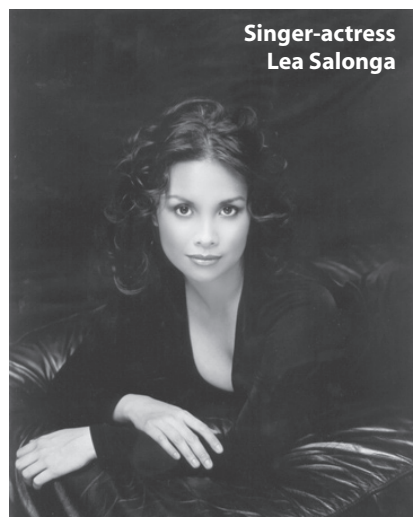
"Playing a wonderful role in a great Broadway show and the baby are more than enough to make this visit special," she explained.

After dizzying rehearsals, she made her grand debut as Fantine on March 6. When she wraps up her contract later in the year, she'll move on to the Asian tour of "Cinderella," which kicks off in Manila in April 2008.

Lea is fond of "Cinderella" because it's a role originated by her idol, Julie Andrews, with whom she worked in a 1992 Hollywood Bowl recording of "The King and I."

"Un-diva-like, down-to-earth, humble, grounded, awesome," Lea enthused about Julie.

She didn't scrimp on praise, either, when describing her "Les Miz" cast mates—particularly Filipino-Americans Ali Ewoldt and Adam Jacobs, who play her grown daughter Cosette and Cosette's partner Marius, respectively.


Singer-actress Lea Salonga

What was opening night like?

It went quite well, I think. If my friends and family are to be believed, I did all right!

What about audience feedback?

So far, audiences have been wonderful. Standing ovations every single performance. The full audience is on its feet once our Valjean (Alexander Gemignani) takes his bow.

What went on in your mind when you sang "I Dreamed a Dream" for the first time on Broadway?

Okay, let me preface this by saying that whenever I have to sing my solo number in a show, I get awfully paranoid. So, the only things going through my mind were the lyrics. Once that was over, I heaved a huge sigh of relief and went on with my track. It's getting easier, somewhat. But I always run through the lyrics in my dressing room before I head onstage.

What was it like interacting with Fil-Ams Ali Ewoldt and Adam Jacobs and the rest of the "Les Miz" cast?

Oh, Ali and Adam are both great, and awfully talented! I was very pleased and proud to hear that they were in the show, and that they deserve to be. And they're both sweet as well. The rest of the company is a great bunch to work with. Talented and good people.

What were rehearsals like?

Rehearsals went by in a blur. I was given a week and a half to prepare, and then I was on. There was blocking for both my Fantine and ensemble tracks, music rehearsals, staging, whatever. Add to that costume fittings, wig fittings and publicity. But thankfully I had many hands to guide me and lead me along to wherever I needed to go.

How did you prepare for Fantine?

First off, I read the Fantine passages in Victor Hugo's novel, just to get a grip on her character and circumstances. Her life is a staggering example of such misfortune. She starts off as the lover of a member of the bourgeoisie who then abandons her and their child. She leaves the child at the inn owned by what she thinks are kindly people. She finds work in her old hometown, gets fired, sells everything she owns—including her hair, teeth and finally her body. She goes from innocence to losing all shame. And I have to do all that in 20 minutes—thankfully without the "selling of the teeth" part.

Have you had time to watch other Broadway plays?

Unfortunately, no. But because I was a guest speller on the hit Broadway show "Spelling Bee," I got to see that one! It was so much fun. Jose Llana (my co-star in "Flower Drum Song") is in it, and he's wonderful!

How are you coping, juggling mothering and Broadway?

My mother is here with me, thank God! She's doing a lot of the caretaking. I have asked her if she wants additional help, but she's always refused. Talk about a heroic feat. Then again, given that it's my mom, I'm not surprised.

Have you taken Nicole backstage in "Les Miz"?

Nope, not yet. Once the weather's better I'll take her.

How has motherhood informed/enriched your work as theater actress?

I guess I'm just more reactive. I'm thinking less, and that's good. My instincts are at work more now, and I'm now more prone to make a stronger choice because I'm going by my gut. If my choice is wrong, the director will let me know. At least, I make a choice.

Authentic stars never give up

By NESTOR TORRE
INQUIRER

Most movies top-bill tried-and-tested stellar combinations because producers want to hedge their bets at the box office.

Every once in a long while, however, movie studios come across a relatively new talent who they believe is gifted and charismatic enough to "carry" a film and attract enough viewers to turn it into a hit.

That's a tall order, but some talents have been able to pull it off, launching long and productive careers, some of which have yet to run their course.

Sharon Cuneta in "Dear Heart," Aga Muhlach in "Bagets," Fernando Poe, Jr. in "Anak ni Palaris," Susan Roces in "Boksingera," Dolphy and Lolita Rodriguez in "Jack and Jill," Snooky Serna and Richard Gomez in "Blusang Itim," Gloria Diaz in "Ang Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa," Elizabeth Oropesa in "Mister Mo, Lover Boy Ko"—the list of popular new stars or stellar combinations is long and distinguished.

Muhlach

Cuneta

On the other hand, there are the talents who don't quite make the grade, whose stellar presence doesn't match their producers' expectations.

In some instances, their failure to shine is not really their fault. It can be attributed to a bad script, inept production, excessively heavy competition from established stars in bigger movies, etc.

Whatever the reason, stardom eludes the new leads, and they are rapped for their "presumption." Some lick their wounds and are able to make it in other vehicles, but most failures lose heart and give up.

We trust that other new talents are made of more sterling stuff, and decide to fight for their place in the show biz sun. They can take heart by recalling the experience of Phillip Salvador, who languished in dim supporting roles in action flicks until Lino Brocka transformed him into a dramatic actor.

Gloria Romero herself started out as an extra and remained in obscurity in another movie studio, before Sampaguita Pictures' starmaker, Doc Perez, saw her stellar potential and gave her increasingly bigger roles, until she attained the stardom that has continued to be hers for more than 50 years.

What about the Nora Aunor? She too played mainly supporting roles when she started making movies, and it was only when her love team with Tirso Cruz III caught fire that she became the country's first superstar.

In the field of music, both Rico J. Puno and Ogie Alcasid paid their dues for years in obscure dives before they stumbled, wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, into the stellar sunlight. On the distaff side, Regine Velasquez went the rounds of small singing contests before she too attained singing-TV-film stardom.

What do these resilient performers have in common? They never gave up! Even when the going was rough, they kept their eyes on the stellar prize.

And, as they struggled and suffered, they kept on learning and honing their skills, so when stardom finally deigned to smile on them, they were good and ready!

'How I Met Your Mother'

The new sitcom, "How I Met Your Mother," premieres on the Etc. channel this month, every Monday at 8:30 p.m. The show revolves around Ted (Josh Radnor) and his quest for love. He eventually finds what he's looking for in Robin (Cobie Smulders)—but then again, destiny may have something else in store for him. Other lead players include Alysson Hannigan, Neil Patrick Harris and Jason Segal.

'300' tops box office

The epic action-adventure production "300" is a hit not only in the States, but also in the Philippines, where it grossed more than P36 million from March 7 to 11. The fest is deemed very impressive, since "300" carried a restricted R-13 classification.

Directed by Zack Snyder, "300" stars Gerald Butler, Lena Headey and Dominic West. It is a ferocious retelling of the ancient Battle of Thermopylae in which King Leonidas (Butler) and 300 Spartans fought to the death against Xerxes and his massive Persian army.

ONLY IN HOLLYWOOD

Borat's gal wears Lhuillier; Clapton leaves us hanging

By RUBEN V. NEPALES
INQUIRER

LOS ANGELES—Being the tinolang manok-eating Pinoy that I am, my instinct upon meeting Isla Fisher, the actress-girlfriend of Sacha Baron Cohen (Borat), was to pronounce her name as in "Isla Puting Bato."

But the pretty redhead—the virgin who turned sexually ravenous in the comedy hit "Wedding Crashers"—clarified: "It is pronounced Eye-la. I was named after the island of Islay, a small island off Scotland where they make whiskey. My parents are both Scottish and both love whiskey."

At this press con, I asked Isla about her decision to wear a gown by Filipino-American designer Monique Lhuillier at the recent Oscars. "I just felt the dress was very feminine and very Jessica Rabbit," replied the Australia-raised actress. Indeed, Isla's décolletage-revealing emerald green satin gown made the hearts of all Roger Rabbits thump.

At this session, she wore a plaid vest over a long-sleeved blue shirt, jeans and gold-hued shoes.

Of course, we all wanted to hear what it's like being the fiancée of the comic genius. But when a colleague started the ball rolling, the ball stopped right there. "I don't talk about my personal life," she declared with the sweetest smile. "I'm sorry." But when their height difference was brought up—Sacha towers at 6' 3" while she's a petite 5' 2"—Isla did say, "That doesn't generally keep people apart."

She claimed they were not often recognized in public. "We've been pretty fortunate in that area (staying private) so far," she said. Sacha introduced us to Isla at a party late last year. When we met them again at one of the Golden Globe afterparties, it was obvious the Cambridge alumnus and Globe winner for Best Actor-Comedy, was proud of his girl.

Asked if her association with Sacha, whose "Borat" movie is a huge success, has boosted her career, Isla was emphatic: "We're pretty separate in our professional lives." Meanwhile, on the personal level, she has converted to Judaism prior to wedding Sacha, who is Jewish.

Enthusiastic reviews

In her latest film "The Lookout," one of the first movies in 2007 to get enthusiastic reviews, Isla plays a stripper. The story was written by Scott Frank, whose credits include the acclaimed "Out of Sight," "Minority Report" and "Get Shorty." Scott also directs for the first time.

The heist drama-thriller is about bank janitor Chris Pratt (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), a high school golden boy until an accident left him with a brain trauma; an ex-con (Matthew Goode) and his dancer babe (Fisher) who try to recruit Chris as their robbery accomplice.

I told Isla that Luvlee Lemons, her name in "The Lookout," establishes her stripper character right away. "It's a very interesting name," she agreed. "A male-fantasy name, essentially." Isla and her co-stars deliver fine performances. Joseph, the child actor in the sitcom "3rd Rock from the Sun," has grown to become a terrific actor. Matthew Goode, Scarlett Johansson's fiancé in Woody Allen's "Matchpoint," Jeff Daniels, as Joseph's blind roommate and mentor, and Carla Gugino round up the cast.

When tossed one of those hypothetical questions, "Would she make a good stripper in real life?," the actress replied, "A lot of people say that actresses are like prostitutes. But they probably get rejected a lot less." Amid the ensuing laughter, I understood why this woman had captivated Sacha.

When the laughter died down, Isla added, "I didn't feel like Luvlee ... it was the opposite. The less I relate to a character, the more I enjoy inhabiting her emotional landscape."

So who is this girl who charmed Sacha? "Who am I?" she asked back with a smile. "My sensibility definitely is Australian. I'm definitely attracted to other Australians. I have a laid-back attitude that I feel is very Australian. I love a good barbee. I grew up with my brothers in the Middle East. After Oman, we were in Iran and Brunei, then England for a year. Then we moved to Australia. My father worked for the World Bank, the UN ..."

She joins a long list of actors whose frequent new-kid-in-school status sparked acting urges: "That's part of why comedy has always been attractive to me. I had to make friends quickly—the way to do that was to make them laugh."

And how did she get from Oman, her birthplace, to Australia and then Hollywood? "There's a whole lot in the middle," clarified the actress. "I left Australia after three years on the series to study [performing as a] clown, in Paris—at Jacques Lecoq, a theater school where Geoffrey Rush and Emma Thompson went. In England, I did a lot of rep theater. It was a great time."

She went on: "From there, I was cast in London to appear in 'Scooby Doo.' I shot for six months in Australia and came out to LA for the premiere. I got myself (a talent agent) and embarked on my American adventure."

Isla Fisher

That was it?

Eric Clapton's short set last week at the Staples Center left us "bitin na bitin." When Slowhand and his terrific fellow musicians exited the stage, we hoped it was just an intermission. But that was it. The Rock and Roll Hall of Famer came back only after long, thunderous cries for an encore.

We've all grown, uh, mature with Eric. These days the Eric Clapton tune we hear more often is "Signe," played on smooth jazz stations. Even on this "light" track, any listener can appreciate his splendid guitar work.

The Staples Center was packed with silver-haired men (in expensive jackets and shoes) and women. But what made us smile was a group of teenaged boys in shorts behind us, who cheered, hollered and stood up repeatedly in ovation for one of the greatest guitarists of all time. (The English legend, 62 this month, was rumored to have had an "intimate encounter" with a local female rocker once, when he performed in Manila.)

The night could have gone on and on as Eric played with two brilliant guitarists, left-handed Doyle Bramhall II and pony-tailed Derek Trucks. I am sure not a few fans were waiting to hear "Lay Down Sally," "Tears in Heaven" or "Change the World," but they had no such luck. The guitar god did "Wonderful Tonight" and "Layla," though.

He hardly spoke beyond, "Thank you!" He didn't introduce the band, either. But since he turned over the spotlight to the musicians several times during the show, introductions would have been superfluous. Still, it would have been nice to hear the man speak.

OPINYON

New questions about Rizal

Looking Back
By AMBETH OCAMPO
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Every year, when I notice the beautiful orange carpets that form under blooming narra trees, I take an anti-histamine for my allergies and prepare myself for yet another round of commencement exercises. This is particularly striking at the Malacañang end of Mendiola Street in Manila, which is home to five educational institutions. When people see the carpet of narra blossoms, they know summer break is near.

It is comforting to know that in the midst of urban blight, the natural cycle of the universe continues despite the abuse we heap on nature and the environment. In another time and another context, when trees turned fiery red, it was believed that the Filipino head-hunting season had begun up north and lowlanders were warned not to stray too far into strange territory.

Having been invited to deliver three commencement speeches this year, I wondered if I had something sensible to say to the Class of 2007—a look at the past rather than at the future. What message from the past would be relevant to young men and women who have their future ahead of them? Of course, one could turn to Jose Rizal and yet again torment students by his example. Textbook history tells us that he graduated from the Ateneo Municipal at the top of his class with the highest honors.

Rizal graduated with a Bachelor of Arts on March 14, 1877 and if we are to go through the subjects he took, these were: School year 1873-74: Greek, Latin, Spanish, Universal Geography; SY 1874-75: Latin, Spanish, Greek, Universal History, History of Spain and the Philippines, Arithmetic and Algebra; SY 1875-76: Rhetoric and Poetics, French, Geometry and Trigonometry; SY 1876-77: Philosophy, Mineralogy and Chemistry, Physics, Botany and Zoology. In all these subjects, he got the grade of "Sobresaliente," or "Excellent." If we are to convert this to a numeric grade, it will be, depending on the school, either 100, or 4 or flat 1.

Unfortunately, we often look at the above subjects and grades with hindsight. We should remember that the Ateneo Municipal of Rizal's time is not the same Ateneo de Manila University of our times. We should remember that when Rizal attended the Ateneo Municipal he was not a college student, although people referred to his school as a "colegio." Something is lost in translation here. What Rizal accomplished in the Ateneo was the equivalent of a high school diploma today. And if one really looks even closer, he may be surprised to discover that Rizal took further classes in the Ateneo in the school year 1877-78, that he was examined, and passed the examination leading to the title "Agrimensor y Perito Tasador de Tierras." Before he enrolled in the University of Santo Tomas to take up medicine, he was by training and license a land surveyor!

For those who insist that Rizal graduated at the top of his class, I would recommend a visit to the Ateneo de Manila University Archives, where the school annual and list of prizes for school year 1876-77 are kept.

Rizal did garner a "sobresaliente" in all of his subjects in addition to a number of special prizes, but was he the valedictorian of his class? This precious booklet shows that there were only 12 students who graduated that year. Their weighted academic average was printed and it is clear that of the 12 students, three had the grade of "Bueno," or "Good," and nine, including Rizal, had "sobresaliente." What is the big deal about Rizal's "sobresaliente" if there were eight other boys in his batch with the same grade? Why do we all presume he was the brightest boy in class, when Rizal himself mentioned a certain Glicerio Anson as a student he admired for being better?

Now we come to the grades in the University of Santo Tomas (UST). They are not as impressive as the Ateneo grades. In his first year in UST (SY 1877-78), Rizal took a preparatory course in theology and law that consisted of the following subjects: Cosmology, Metaphysics, Theodicy and the History of Philosophy. In all these, he was rated "sobresaliente."

Then he proceeded to medicine, and his grades dipped. In the preparatory courses for Medicine 1878-79, he got Aprovechado in Advanced Physics and Advanced Natural History and "Sobresaliente" in Advanced Chemistry. In first year Medicine (1878-79), he took General Anatomy and Histology, Descriptive Anatomy, Exercises of Osteology and Dissection. In all these. he got the rating "Bueno." In second year medicine (1879-80), he took Anatomy and Histology, Descriptive Anatomy, Exercises in Dissection, Physiology, Private and Public Hygiene, for all of which he got a rating of "Bueno." In Third year (1880-81), he got "Aprobado" (that's a passing mark!) for General Pathology and Pathologic Histology. In Therapeutics, Medical Matter and Art of Prescribing, he got "Sobresaliente"; for Surgical Anatomy. Operations, External Medical Applications and Bandages, "Bueno." Finally, on his fourth year (1881-1882): he was rated Notable in all these subjects: Medical Pathology, Surgical Pathology. Obstetrics, Illnesses of Women and Children, and Siphilography.

Since Rizal cannot be blamed for these grades, it has become traditional to blame UST and the Dominicans. Perhaps, we should realize that Rizal was, by talent and temperament, an artist and poet; a medical degree requires the use of another side of the brain. If he did take up Medicine to cure his mother's failing eyesight, wasn't it easier to just send her to a specialist? Old knowledge, new questions indeed.

Comments are welcome at aocampo@ateneo.edu.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Arroyo now into selling RP shores?

I am outraged beyond words by the news report that Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo views with so much elation the imminent sale of a chunk of Panglao Island in Bohol province to a Saudi Arabian royal family.

Has the President gone mad? For as long as the 1987 Constitution is not amended or revised, its "National Patrimony" provisions remain in force and effect. The sale will deprive small fishermen and their families of their homes and access to food and livelihood.

Of course, Arroyo's brilliant and shrewd legal yeomen will find ways to manipulate the National Patrimony provisions—perhaps, through a joint-venture agreement with Filipino corporations. But in reality, the latter will just be used as dummies of the foreign buyer.

It goes without saying that Arroyo does not consider the very poor communities that will be affected by the sale. At the rate she is going, soon enough the Philippines will no longer belong to Filipinos, and more and more of our countrymen will be rendered landless and homeless in their very own homeland.

Of course, it is no secret that the Arroyo administration has been a staunch advocate of the exploration and exploitation of the country's natural resources. This is clear from the continuously increasing presence of large-scale foreign mining concessions in the country. Anyway, common decency, or "delicadeza," dictates that Arroyo should not be bragging about the outright sale of public lands to foreigners, as she is doing now in the case of Panglao Island.

Encouraging the sale of public lands to aliens has the most serious, if not despicable, implications. By doing it, Arroyo is in effect making a public invitation for foreigners to bid for the rest of the country's shores, virgin forests (or at least whatever is left after mining) and islands.

Angelisa L. Razo
Iñigo Street, Davao City

'Albularyo'

Pinoy Kasi
By MICHAEL TAN
INQUIRER

Last Sunday the Inquirer had a full-page spread featuring 10 medicinal plants endorsed by the Department of Health. The eye-catching feature, with colored photographs, brought back memories of my own forays into the world of the "albularyo."

When I was still in college, back in the 1970s, I volunteered with the Rural Missionaries, a group of Catholic sisters that organized community-based health programs. As my graduation approached, I asked the sisters if I could continue to work with them after college. I had a feeling they didn't quite know what to do with a veterinarian and since I couldn't become a nun either, one of them came up with a brilliant idea: why not get me to research on medicinal plants?

I jumped on the chance, but without any illusions. I was a city creature, through and through, who knew next to nothing about plants. The first time I volunteered for work in a rural area, I gasped at the sight of a tree with wonderful flowers and asked the mayor's wife what the tree was.

It was her turn to gasp. Really now, how was I to know that mango trees produced flowers?

I had taken botany in college but could barely remember what pistils and stamens were. So to prepare myself for medicinal plants research, I signed up for a course in economic botany. That was a fascinating course, and I'm convinced, to this day, that if we could teach botany by pointing out the uses of different plants, students would probably remember much more of that subject.

'Plawel'

So, off I went to Mindanao, then to the Visayas, then to Luzon, to interview a few village "albularyo." That term is misleading though; it's a Spanish-Filipino word that means "herbalist." It came about because in western countries, most medicinal plants are small herbs. I learned quickly that in a tropical country like the Philippines, our immense biodiversity offers us so many more diverse medicinal plants, from tiny herbs to towering forest trees.

Early on in the research, I realized too it wasn't just the "albularyo" who had information on medicinal plants. Every household had its own stocks of traditional medicine in their backyard, and generally, the older women knew how to pick out and prepare the plants.

They were also always ready to share what they knew. Within a few weeks, I had two field notebooks bulging with information.

Even back then, I could tell that folk knowledge about many medicinal plants was beginning to disappear. In one Ifugao village, a young student was assigned to accompany me out in the field to identify plants. After a few minutes, I realized she was identifying every other plant as "plawel," which I dutifully jotted down in my notebook -- until I realized "plawel" was "flower." I was tempted to point at a mango tree with full blooms to ask her what it was.

After a few months of this kind of work, I realized, sorting through all the different plant names -- whether Cebuano, Tagalog or Ilokano -- there was really a small core of about 20 medicinal plants that were used throughout the country. I went back to Manila and read voraciously to get more information on these plants -- from the classic "Medicinal Plants of the Philippines" (by Eduardo Quisumbing, published in the early 1950s) to Chinese pharmacology books.

I put the information together into a booklet with a rather fancy title: Philippine Medicinal Plants in Common Use: Their Phytochemistry and Pharmacology. It was a rather technical book, but I'd like to think it helped to stimulate more interest in medicinal plants in our health programs. In the 1980s, an American nonprofit group, World Neighbors, got me to produce less technical materials, consisting of posters and a slide presentation explaining the uses of medicinal plants.

Demystifying plants

The posters and slides were attempts to demystify the use of medicinal plants. The years of research on medicinal plants had made me realize there was so much of magic involved in using the plants. Take "pito-pito" as an example: That was 7 leaves of 7 plants put together for a general tonic. I'd imagine that if some Chinese-Filipino had developed that decoction, it would have been "walo-walo," given the Chinese love of the number 8.

In recent years, commercial interests have contributed to further mystifying the plants with references to "phytochemicals," as if these were new discoveries. All that the word means is "plant chemicals," which scientists have been looking at for decades now.

An example of phytochemicals would be essential oils. A plant with a strong smell will have several of these oils, which can help to clear a congested nose, bring up the phlegm from the lungs, or, externally, help to relieve itchiness or heat. Sounds familiar? Yes, Vicks Vaporub is a mixture of those oils. Yerba Buena ("the good herb"), one of the 10 medicinal plants endorsed by the Department of Health, is an example of a plant rich in essential oils.

The community-based health programs helped people to rediscover the plants, minus the magic. Communities came up with their own products like SLK Cough Syrup, made from "sampalok" [tamarind] leaves, "luya"]ginger] and "kalamansi" [native citrus]. ABC (avocado, "bayabas" or guava, and "kaimito" or star apple) leaves were used for diarrhea. There was even oil mixed with ginger and "sili" [pepper] leaves and used as a balm for muscle pains, which, I'd advise people tongue-in-cheek, could also be used to season their food.

Nationalism, science

Looking back at those experiences, I do feel we need to go beyond SLK and ABC. I still keep hearing of research that ask the "albularyo" about the plants they're using, and I think that's such a waste of time. We know what they're using; the question is, what are we going to do with all that knowledge.

I squirm whenever I hear officials talking about medicinal plants as "cheap alternatives for the poor." There's more to the plants, and neighboring countries, knowing this, encourage local companies to develop medicinal plants. China has the most developed systems for medicinal plants and rich Chinese-Filipinos are known to fly to China, paying thousands of dollars for some of the traditional preparations.

I'm amazed to see Filipinos shelling out a thousand pesos for a bottle of imported mangosteen extract, for example. Or ordering banaba products from the United States for diabetes. Banaba is a tree with purple flowers that you find all over the country. Back in the 1950s, there were already local scientific articles about banaba's medicinal uses but no one seemed interested in taking them beyond research. Today, banaba isn't even in the government's list of endorsed plants.

If we were more nationalistic and more scientific about our medicinal plants, we'd probably have more than those 10 plants to offer. And if we don't get our act together, foreign companies are going to patent medicines from the plants and sell them back to us in fancy packages, at astronomical prices.

SAMU'T SARI

Study to link remittance, Filipino spirituality

By JEREMAIAH M. OPINIANO
WWW.OFWJOURNALISM.NET

SAN JOSE, California–Crisanta Allas's arm shot forward to stop the roll of an empty softdrink can–one of several garbage the 78-year-old Filipino picks up so she can send money to her daughter in Manila.

Allas, a staff of the Northside Community Center here, is one of several hundred elderly Filipinos coming out of retirement to perform odd jobs to sustain their role as the link to life by their loved ones across another continent.

There is something spiritual in what people like Allas does, so thinks Dr. Joaquin Gonzalez who is studying the link between immigration and the spirituality of Filipino-Americans.

The preliminary results of the ongoing study by Gonzalez, director of Philippine Studies at the University of San Francisco, reveals the connection between the value of giving and being Filipino in the heart of the country's colonizers is less tenuous.

For Allas, however, sending money to her ailing daughter in the Philippines, home for her once, is a duty she silently performs.

"My daughter can't walk, you know; she needs money," Allas said adding this week would be the third time this year she would remit US$100 (P5,000 at US$1=P50) to the Philippines.

"I just don't complain that I don't have money," Allas said trudging inside the 250-square meter social hall.

She spoke to the OFW Journalism Consortium while cleaning up after several of her compatriots mulled patriotism and pined for a brighter Philippines during the South Bay's celebration last October 21 of the centennial of the Filipinos' first arrival to the US in the 20th century.

Hunched back over plastic cups, half-eaten chicken sandwiches, and disposable straws, Allas could only sigh.

The irony escapes her.

But it doesn't with Gonzalez who said he is keeping an open-mind since he has so far surveyed only 1,457 Filipino Catholics from the dioceses of San Jose, Oakland, and San Francisco.

Looking into these Filipinos socio-economic condition, citizenship, employment, and religious activities, Gonzalez initially discovered that over half of those surveyed send at least $100 to $500 monthly to the Philippines.

These initial findings, presented during the Fil-Am immigration centennial forum at the University of San Francisco early last month, would be presented early next year.

Remitting

Gonzalez surveyed 342 respondents in San Jose, 391 in Oakland, and 717 in San Francisco. The three dioceses have 280,301 Filipino Catholics (including 76,060 in San Jose), says the American bishops' migrants and refugees office.

Some 57 percent or 822 of the respondents said they send a minimum US$100 to a maximum $500 (P25,000) every month. Those who said they send a minimum US$500 up to US$1,000 (P50,000) a month formed 23 percent (340 respondents) of the total.

Gonzalez's research stands to affirm the 2004 Asian Development Bank's study Enhancing the Efficiency of Overseas Filipinos' Remittances, which found that some 40 percent remit monthly, and that the average remittance amount was $342.

ADB surveyed 413 Filipinos in the San Francisco consular jurisdiction, as well as Filipinos in Singapore, vacationing overseas Filipinos, and families with dependents abroad.

ADB study team leader Ildefonso Bagasao, however, thinks that Filipinos in the US are different because many of them have reunited with their families here, unlike Filipinos in other countries who primarily fend for families back home in the Philippines.

OFWJC/JEREMAIAH M. OPINIANO

Glory Gagarin was just in time before Dollar America eXchange's remittance office in Santa Clara, California closed last Oct. 28. She was able to send $170 through Smart Money's text remittance technology to her mother-in-law in southern Philippine province of Albay.

These Filipinos are like Mara Mendoza and Consuelo Dacanay.

Mendoza, who works for a non-profit organization in San Jose, told the Consortium she sends US$100 to siblings in Manila "only when the need arises."

Meanwhile, Dacanay sends home between US$100 to US$200 four times a year.

This, she said, she does religiously despite having lost a security-related job three years ago at the Mineta San Jose International Airport.

Gonzalez's study is expected to bare the spiritual values behind such resilience.

Some 47 percent of Gonzalez's respondents send their money through money transfer companies like Western Union and Filipino-run Bayanihan Cargo International Inc. and Luzon Brokerage Co. (LBC). The other 32 percent on the other hand send their money through bank channels.

The remaining 21 percent send money through courier channels like the US Postal System, FedEx and American Express, as well as through the Filipino immigrant practice of padala (personally entrusting of money to vacationing compatriots at no cost but at high risk).

Responding

Supporting grandparents and parents is the reason some 24 percent of total respondents say why they send money to the Philippines.

Gonzalez's study noted that other purposes of remittances include relatives' health care needs (22 percent), housing mortgage, and school payments of direct children and nieces or grandchildren (18 percent each).

When May and October come along, a month each before classes in Philippine universities open, undocumented immigrant worker Wigberto (not his real name) sends $2,000 to fully pay the tuition and other fees of his five children, including three in college. Earnings from doing home service electrical work also enable the electrical engineer to send $1,000 monthly to his family in Angeles City, Pampanga province (northeast of Manila).

As for the respondents' total annual earnings, 14 percent earn between $50,001 and $60,000; 13 percent take home $20,001 to $30,000; and 12 percent earn incomes in each of these ranges—$30,001 to $40,000 and $40,001 to $50,000.

These varied annual incomes are, for 75 percent of respondents, a product of one job. Some 15 percent of respondents have two jobs while 2 percent have three or more jobs.

Some 21 percent of respondents are in hotel, restaurant, and government service jobs; 20 percent are in legal, accounting and consultancy professions; and 13 percent are in marketing, retail and sales, engineering, information technology and electronics.

Dacanay receives a monthly pension of more than $800. All her eight professional children are employed.

Recently, she said, they sent $600 to Dacanay's sister for the repair of her home destroyed when typhoon Xangsane entered the Philippines.

"My eight kids pitched in $50 each, and I gave $200," Dacanay said.

For the former public school teacher, with or without a work here, sending – sharing, as she says–her money makes her "feel good and happy".

While Gonzalez's remittance datasets are what US- and Philippine-run companies have been looking for, the professor's study would look at the motivation for the act of sending money.

The Philippines, colonized for more than a century by Spanish friars and soldiers, remains the only country in Asia with majority of its 87 million people following the beliefs and traditions of the State of Vatican. ***(OFW Journalism Consortium and the Yuchengco Media Fellows Program, University of San Francisco-Center for the Pacific Rim)***

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

CHRISTENING PARTY

Parents Gimo and Laila Yansan of BOLIS R-US Catering hold up their newly Christianized daughter, Genelyn Yansan, who was baptized last Sunday, March 18, 2007. Other picture shows the christening party for Genelyn, held March 18, 2007, at the Minachum Atdao Pavilion. With her are her parents, the caring Ninongs and Ninangs and the High Pitch Band at the back.

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